

BOB-09

EVERYWHERE I GO PEOPLE ASK ME: ARE YOU FROM LIMON?
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Dear Peter,

The immigration officer at San Jose international airport looked as if he was at a lost trying to figure out how to read my passport. Silently, he started searching through the pages of my passport for the holder's name beginning from the left side to the right but he could not find it. He turned the passport the other way round (upside down) but the few English letters that he saw on the page appeared upside down too. So he steadied the passport and now begun reading from the right side to the left. He stopped momentarily, looked up at me, smiled and he said to himself, "que raro pero interesante", in a low but audible voice. I smiled too. It must have been the unreadability of some of the words which were in the Arabic language that must have fascinated him, I thought. Perhaps it was his first time seeing a passport of this nature which is written in a language which was neither Spanish nor English. Then he asked me in Spanish, "de que Pais eres Usted? (meaning from which country are you from?)". And I said from Sudan. And raising his eyebrows he said, "Sudan? por donde?(whereabout) de que parte? (from which part...)". And guessing that he meant to ask from which part of the world was that, I mentioned North-east Africa.

He pulled a book from under his desk and checked through it. Still the name of the country just mentioned could not ring a bell. Then he looked around both sides of his desk and over his shoulders. I could only guess that he was seeking a second opinion about this little-known-about country in Africa. He called one of his colleagues. They exchanged a few words. But I could still see the surprise in both their eyes. At this point, however, I decided to volunteer to show where my name was in the passport. And surprisingly, after checking that I had a tourist visa they asked me, "what am I going to do in Costa Rica?". I told them tourism (of course) for one month but also mentioned that I was coming to do some studies on health care in Costa Rica. They looked satisfied with the answers and permission to stay for one month was stamped on my passport and they said, "bienvenido a Costa Rica". I was happy with their decision, of course, and I thanked them in Spanish too, "muchas gracias senores, muy amables".

Then just as I stepped past the immigration to go and claim my luggage, another young man called me and said, "please could I see your passport again? Do you have any letters of invitation? Thanks haven, I had my papers handy and gave them to him. He looked at them, then asked me to follow him to a nearby office and I did. He asked me to remain outside while he entered into

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that office with the papers. I waited. He appeared again after a few minutes and handing back my papers to me, he said, "todo esta bien ahora y que disfrutes su estancia aqui en Costa Rica (it's all fine and okay now, please have a good time in Costa Rica)".

For a moment I wondered at my temporary isolation from the arriving passengers and still could not understand well the meaning of the extra verification required of me. But I thought this was a question of luck, perhaps the same thing could have happened to anyone else. Anyway, I went and claimed my luggage. Customs clearance was quick. When I reached the arrivals terminal it was not difficult for my host to recognize me from the crowd of people that was just beginning to disperse.

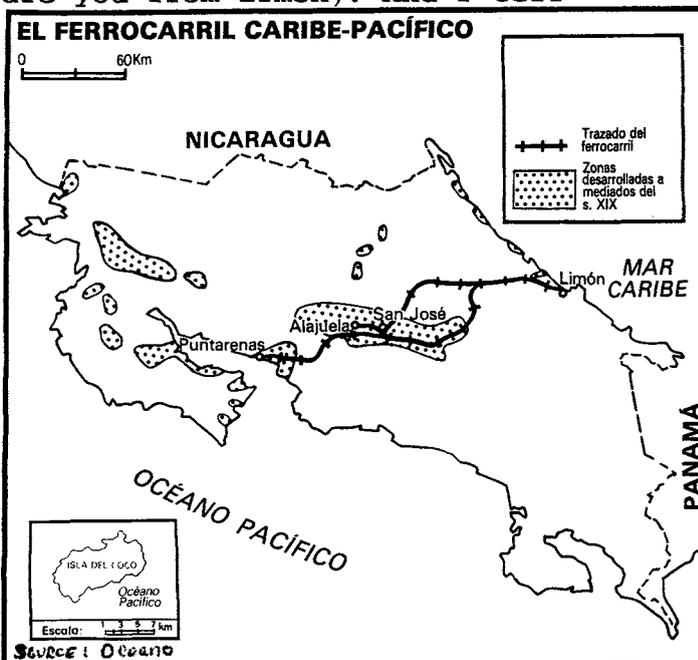
As we drove to downtown San Jose I was pondering on how long it has been waiting for permission to visit Costa Rica: one complete year! But inside I was happy I made it at last.

After I was accommodated and temporarily settled, I hit the street to see what life was like in San Jose. The streets are safe and I walked around town a great deal, although public transport (buses and taxis) is quiet good. In this way I met many interesting and nice people. Ticos have a friendly nature and like to chat with visitors to inquire about their countries. But many of the people I met rarely failed to ask me almost the one and same question: eres de Limon (are you from Limon)? And I tell them no, I am not from Limon.

I thought that was an interesting situation because the question I expected to hear is "de donde eres (where are you from)" and of course the answer would come so easily, but Limon. Why Limon? I have not heard of a country with a name like this before. Why would Ticos suggest for me a name of a place where I am supposed to be coming from? Strange. What's up in that place called Limon, anyway?

I begun to make inquiries from the few friends I knew, then. They explained that Limon was a province on the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica and its capital is a sea port town which bears the same name (of Puerto Limon) as the province itself. Some friends suggested to me that Limon would be an interesting (and exotic) place to visit, "it's another world". Others friends said, "hay mucho agente morena alli (there are many black people there)". Black people? How come? And where from? I kept asking myself. What I had known before about Costa Rica was that it had a homogeneous population mainly of European descent.

A friend suggested that perhaps the best place I could



access information (in the English language) about Limon would be the Costa Rican-North American Cultural Center. I asked him for direction. And he mentioned, "en la calle de los Negritos (also called street Number 37)", not far from the university in San Pedro and also it's just within walking distance from central San Jose.

A reference book on Central America showed an ethnic division of Costa Rica (data from 1984 population of 2,460,226) of this nature: mostly European (Spanish) and Mestizo (Spanish-Indian), 3% African (1). Others showed the presence of Chinese, native Indians (2) and Zambos (Indian-african)(3). In 1992-93, Indian population was 1% of national population of 3,160,408 (4).



SOURCE: OCEANO

A FISHERMAN FROM LIMON

The Black population of Limon came to Costa Rica mainly from Jamaica in the 1870s to work as laborers on the San Jose-Limon railway line which was then under construction. A few returned to Jamaica, but many remained in Costa Rica working for the railways company, and as laborers on banana and cacao plantations. Fishing was another industry they were engaged in.

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1. C/CCA's 1986, Caribbean and Central American Databook, Caribbean Central American Action. p. 85
 2. Marc Edelman and Joanne Kenen, (1989). The Costa Rican Reader, Grove Weidenfeld, New York. p. 16-17
 3. Quince Duncan and Carlos Melendez, (1993). El Negro en Costa Rica, Editorial Costa Rica, San Jose. p. 33-43
 4. Market Data, (1992-1993, Third edition. Costa Rica: datos e indicadores basicos, Costa Rica at a glance. p. 5 and 32

The blacks of Limon were not recognized as Costa Rican citizens for a long time. "Until 1949, even second and third generation West Indian descendents were denied Costa Rican citizenship. And during the 1930s and 1940s, laws were passed forbidding the employment of blacks outside of the Atlantic Zone. Also discriminatory immigration laws prevented West Indian seeking employment as wage workers from reentering the country".(5)

However, the situation changed after 1948. The new government that José Figueres Ferrer established would be the first Costa Rican government to respond in a positive way to the needs of the Afro-Caribbean population on the Atlantic coast.(7) In the words of Duncan, "Triunfan los insurrectos. José Figueres llega a Limón y recorre los pueblos hablando en ingles, besando a los niños negros, bailando con las negras. Nunca antes ningún presidente de Costa Rica había hecho tal cosa. El negro por primera vez se interesa por el país."(6) Since then Limon blacks have been granted Costa Rican citizenship.

Then I could not wait to visit Limon. The best way to travel from San Jose to Limon is by bus. The fare is quite reasonable. Just about 400 colones (or \$2.70) for a one-way ticket. Return tickets are not sold. You are allowed only to buy one-way ticket to the place you are visiting and when you reach there you can then buy your returning ticket.

The paved road to Limon is good and it undulates through high and forested mountains of the Cordillera Central. The scenery is beautiful and it's all green through the year. Before descending to lower altitude on the approaches of Guapiles, the bus passes through a long tunnel which has been dug through the mountain and vehicles must use low headlights to see their way through, lest they meet each other headlong.

You begin feeling the warm climate (and humidity too) of the Atlantic zone as the bus slowly descends the altitudes. But the feeling is nice especially if you are wearing the cool guayabera. Then you begin seeing the banana plantations, one after the other all the way. Then as you enter Limon town from the west side, you will see a large cemetery (painted-white) on the left side of the road with the inscription "China Colony" in large black letters. When you finally arrive to the end-point (downtown Limon) you will see the (skin) color change that my friends back in San Jose have been referring to. What you are seeing is infact what people (like myself) didn't know existed before- the African side of Costa Rica. Also it will not take you long to discover significant Chinese presence in Limon as soon as you walk into one of the shops, restaurants or bars. Many of them are running small business.

5. Reference (2) p. 161-169

6. Reference (3) P.

7. Paula Palmer, (1993). 'What happen' of Costa Rica's Talamanca Coast, Publications in the English S.A., San Jose, Costa Rica.

In Limon you can feel the distinctiveness of the culture of the Afro-Costarricenses in different ways: in the music they play like reggae, calypso etc; the food they eat- the typical dish is the "Rice and Beans" (which is cooked in coconut oil) and served with fish, meat or chicken; and the pidgin English people speak.

The pidgin language is really interesting. For example, on the street I over heard one old women saying to her friend "Oh, long time no see. Wa'apin with you?", which means "it's been a long time I haven't seen you. What has happened to you?".

But also there are people in Limon who speak standard English which is quiet good. And so there shouldn't be any worry about language problem if you are intending to visit the area for the very first time. Spanish is spoken by most Afro-Costarricenses.

An if you are lucky to be in Limon on October 12, you could see the street Carnival with street music and dancing. It's the most colorful event of cultura Limonense in the year.



CARNIVAL IN LIMON

Regrettably, however, the survival of black culture in Costa Rica faces an uncertain future. Perhaps the quote below would clarify the area where the trouble is:

"One effect of the persistence of ethnic discrimination against blacks is the preservation of black culture. The obvious skin-color difference between West Indians and the rest of Costa Rican population has prevented the second and Third generation of blacks from blending into Costa Rican society, even though they have risen in the local class structure. Under similar circumstances of dramatic upward mobility, other immigrant ethnic groups would have been assimilated. Although professional blacks tend to marry Hispanics and often forbid their children to speak Creole English, the racism of the Costa Rican society limits their assimilation. Were it not for this physically based discrimination, blacks would probably no longer exist as a distinct ethnic group in Costa Rica".(8)

8. Reference (2) p. 167-168

As I sat on the bus on my way back to San Jose I couldn't help thinking about my experiences in Limon. The words of Mr. Louis and the feelings with which he said them keep coming back to my mind: " I am truly happy to meet with you. It is my first time to meet an African from Africa". And Lloyd who said: "we are trying to keep our black culture alive. It is the one last thing left to us which truly belongs to us. Imagine what shall become of our identity and us as black people if we should lose this culture, man?". And the female health worker who said: "I don't know what is happening to our culture nowadays. We feel isolated and hardly have contacts with our native Jamaica. And even our young men and women of today, they *are* more inclined to marry from other cultures".

Peter, I think this story is enough food for thought. Although history tells us of cultures that had died out, it is not easy to think of a contemporarily living and vibrant culture which is on its way to being buried alive.

The "eres de Limon" question don't concern me any more. The question that is is "what is happening to cultural tolerance" in a multi-cultural and democratic society (!) like Costa Rica?. If religions are well tolerated in the country, then why not different cultures?

Hasta aqui, muchas gracias.

Yours sincerely,



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